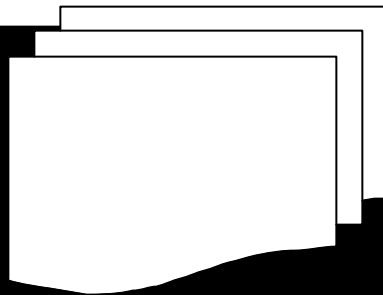


the physical disability FILE



information for and about people with physical disabilities

Building Accessible Congregations

Only as little as 25 years ago, you could wander down a city sidewalk without seeing a person using a wheelchair. You could stop at the corner and not find a curb cut—a ramp that slopes from sidewalk to street.

When a law mandating curb cuts was proposed in Wisconsin, proponents said the ramps would make it possible for people in wheelchairs to negotiate streets and sidewalks. But some communities opposed the law, claiming it wasn't needed because "we don't see people in wheelchairs using our sidewalks."

The law passed despite the opposition, and today it's common to see people with physical disabilities everywhere you go. People with disabilities shop in the mall, drive to work, eat at restaurants, go to church. And often it's little things like curb cuts that make the world accessible to them.

If you don't see people with disabilities at your church, synagogue or mosque, perhaps it's because there is a barrier preventing participation. For people with visual impairments, you might need to provide an alternative to standard printed materials. You might need an assistive listening device for a hard of hearing person, or a ramp to your door for a person using a wheelchair.

On the federal level, religious organizations are not covered in most instances by the Americans with Disabilities Act, the 1990 law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. It's up to the organizations themselves to see the need and respond to it—to provide the large-print bulletin or the audio-loop system.

In Wisconsin, however, the state building code (Comm 50-64 and 69) has required accessible architectural features in all places of worship since 1963. The only exceptions are to the chancel and baptisteries. For more information about the building code, contact the state Division of Safety and Buildings at 608/266-8982 (voice) or 608/264-8795 (TTY).

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) offers extensive information about accessibility and funding options for places of worship. You can reach NOD by phone at: 202/293-5960 (voice and TTY); or visit their web site at: www.nod.org.